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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [OVIP](#) [KJUS](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENT ABD AL-MAHDI'S JANUARY 12-14 VISIT  
TO WASHINGTON

REF: A. BAGHDAD 28  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 20

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES ROBERT FORD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Vice President Adel Abd al-Mahdi travels to Washington to show us that he has what it takes to be Prime Minister, according to his close aides. We assess that he is a strong candidate for Prime Minister in the next government, having positioned himself as a good compromise for Shi'a parties feeling alienated by PM Maliki's attempts to concentrate power and enjoying close ties to the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. Abd al-Mahdi views Iraq as the vanguard of a new, democratic Shi'a voice in the region, which he asserts can drive progressive change from Lebanon to Iran. Abd al-Mahdi is likely to use his visit to seek assurances that Iraq will remain a priority for the U.S. and press for more tangible implementation of the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), in particular, urging U.S. help to normalize Iraq's relations with neighbors, conclude Iraq's Chapter VII obligations, strengthen Iraq's core institutions and liberalize its economy. He may also wish to discuss the future of U.S.-Iraq security cooperation in the context of the ongoing withdrawal of U.S. troops. Abd al-Mahdi will want to use his visit to raise his stature before the home audience in the run-up to the March election. Finally, given the current backlash in Iraq over the Blackwater decision, Abd al-Mahdi will likely be cautious about appearing overly "pro-American" at this time.

[1](#)2. (C) Abd al-Mahdi's visit presents an opportunity for us to reassure the Iraqis of the U.S. commitment to build a long-term relationship with Iraq through the Security Agreement and the SFA. We should encourage Abd al-Mahdi to continue his leadership role in bridging differences, including actions to promote Shi'a-Sunni reconciliation and manage Arab-Kurd tensions. We should stress to Abd al-Mahdi that the GOI's demands for changes to already agreed-upon oil contracts could impede near-term development of Iraq's oil sector and discourage potential investors in Iraq. Finally, we should use Abd al-Mahdi's visit to tell the Iraqi public that the Administration sympathizes with the victims in the Blackwater case and will continue to seek accountability.

ABD AL-MAHDI AS CANDIDATE AND POSSIBLE PM OF IRAQ  
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[1](#)3. (C) The Vice President's staff told CDA December 30 that he's going to the U.S. in part to show he's PM-material; he knows we opposed his being named PM in 2006. While ranked slightly behind Ayad Allawi and Maliki in recent polls of Iraqi figures, Abd al-Mahdi will be a very strong candidate for PM if the two major Shi'a-led coalitions (Iraqi National Alliance and State of Law) join forces after the election

and, as is likely, cannot agree on a second term for Maliki. Abd al-Mahdi has positioned himself as a leader willing and able to unify and lead Iraqis of widely differing political persuasions. Since the death of former ISCI Chairman Abdel Aziz al-Hakim in August 2009, Abd al-Mahdi and al-Hakim's son and successor, Ammar al-Hakim, have sought to push ISCI to the forefront in promoting Iraq's relations with the Arab world. Significantly, we have also noted increasing moderation in ISCI's rhetoric regarding "Ba'athist" influence. While Abd al-Mahdi's reputation as an honest politician was heavily damaged by his security detail's participation in the September 2009 robbery of a Baghdad bank, he is still widely respected as a solid administrator and a leader with an economic vision - two attributes that are sorely needed in the next Iraqi government. What should concern us is the potential role of the Sadrist Trend, ISCI's ally in the INA, during government formation. We should encourage Abd al-Mahdi to clarify the INA's power-sharing arrangements and to press the Sadrist Trend to moderate its anti-U.S. position.

#### SECURITY COOPERATION

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¶4. (C) Abd al-Mahdi would like to discuss the transformation of U.S.-Iraq security cooperation as the Security Agreement is implemented and U.S. troops withdraw. He told CODEL McCain on January 5 that the GOI must not overestimate its security forces' capabilities. He has quietly expressed interest in continuing security cooperation with the U.S. after 2011. We should ask Abd al-Mahdi where Iraqi military needs may be greatest and what are the greatest sensitivities.

#### NATIONAL UNITY AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENT

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¶5. (C) As witnessed during protracted negotiations to conclude an election law in the last two months of 2009, key Iraqis, including Abd al-Mahdi, remain beholden to consensus-based, rather than majoritarian, decision-making. With the exception of PM Maliki, senior Iraqi leaders have uniformly told us that Iraq is not yet ready for majoritarian rule, and that a consensus-based approach should be carried forward by the next government. They can and will ignore any timeline - including the ones the United States and UNAMI tried to impose on election law deliberations - in order to achieve consensus. Abd al-Mahdi, with MP Hadi al-Amiri (Badr bloc leader) and Deputy Prime Minister Rafi al-Issawi, played a critical role in election law negotiations, developing options to bridge differences between parties and coaxing parties to sit together to resolve conflicts. Abd al-Mahdi has seized on the importance of including Sunnis and Kurds in government formation and, consequently, will be careful to keep their equities in mind throughout the election and government-formation process. We should encourage Abd al-Mahdi to continue his leadership role in bridging differences and, when necessary, stepping in to enforce compromises.

¶6. (C) We should underscore areas where the GOI must do a better job to facilitate reconciliation:

--Refugee returns and assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs): Assistance to refugees and the displaced remains a U.S. priority, and we hope that the new government will ensure GOI coordination of efforts to assist IDPs.

--Detainees: Sunni political leaders believe that the prison population in Iraq is disproportionately Sunni. Sunni members of parliament have lobbied for more humane conditions and are beginning to exercise their right to inspect prisons. We hope that the new government will commit to improving the corrections system and allow full access to prison facilities to human rights monitors.

--Sons of Iraq (SOI) Integration: Many Sunnis believe that the GOI failed to abide by agreements to provide tribal members of the Sahwa ("Awakening" movement) with government jobs and positions in the Iraqi Security Forces, and that this may have made possible the devastating series of bombings in Baghdad between August and December 2009. Integration of SOI members into government jobs is vital not only for reducing sectarianism, but also for increasing security.

--Property/Military Pensions: Passage of a Military Service and Retirement law will be an important step in Shia-Sunni reconciliation, isolating high-ranking officers who committed crimes, while securing a livelihood for thousands of lower-ranking officers and allowing some to return from exile and reclaim property seized post-2003. Yet passage of the law remains deadlocked. VP Tariq al-Hashimi vetoed it in November 2009, believing that its provisions were not generous enough, that it cast the De-Ba'athification net too widely, and that those who authored the text had insufficient military expertise.

--Kirkuk: Some speculate that Shi'a leaders will strike a deal with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) regarding Kirkuk's future status before elections, in order to secure Kurdish support during government formation. Qto secure Kurdish support during government formation. We should emphasize that the December 7 White House statement, which expressed U.S. willingness to assist the KRG and GOI resolve internal disputes, should not be misconstrued as U.S. support for Kurdish positions on those matters. We should caution parties against making narrowly agreed deals on Kirkuk's future status simply for the sake of securing Kurdish support in forming a government coalition. We should urge that all stakeholders participate in reaching a negotiated, consensus agreement on Kirkuk.

#### INVESTMENT CLIMATE

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17. (C) Iraq has awarded contracts to international consortia for the exploitation of ten oil fields. However, within weeks of negotiating and initialing the contracts, the GOI demanded changes to all of them, including its contract with ExxonMobil (ref A). Several of the requested contract

changes are significant enough to derail the ExxonMobil contract, and the company sought our help. Ambassador stressed to the Prime Minister in December that such attempts to change carefully negotiated and initialed contracts were unacceptable, counter to Iraq's own long-term interests, and could derail the contracts. We should stress to Abd al-Mahdi that if the GOI continues demanding changes to already agreed-upon contracts, it will set the dangerous precedent that an initialed contract is not a final agreement and will impede near-term development of Iraq's oil sector and the accompanying revenue growth on which Iraq is almost wholly dependent.

#### BLACKWATER REPERCUSSIONS

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18. (C) The recent judicial decision to acquit five of the six Blackwater employees involved in the September 2007 altercation in Baghdad was widely misunderstood and condemned in Iraq (ref B). Abd al-Mahdi will press the Administration to appeal the federal court's decision, and hopes to receive a briefing on possible next steps in the case. This situation is especially sensitive for Abd al-Mahdi, as one of his bodyguards was killed in 2006 by a Blackwater employee in the International Zone.

#### IRAQ AND ITS NEIGHBORS

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19. (C) Iran: Abd al-Mahdi will seek to alleviate U.S. concerns about ISCI's close relations with Iran. He knows how sensitive this was in 2006. Like many others in the

Iraqi Shi'a and Kurdish political class who actively opposed the previous regime, Abd al-Mahdi traveled regularly to Iran after he joined the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (now ISCI) in the early 1980s. More recently, however, he has encouraged his colleagues to recognize the importance of balancing Iraq's relations with Iran and developing economic and cultural links with Iraq's Arab neighbors and Turkey. Unlike other Iraqi leaders, he hasn't advocated to us that the 1975 Algiers Agreement on the Iranian border delineation be cancelled or changed. The Vice President is also an advocate of continuing a strong relationship with the U.S.

¶10. (C) Abd al-Mahdi believes that development of democratic government institutions, as well as the revival of the "quietist" Shi'a clerical school in Najaf, will directly challenge clerical rule in Iran, diminish Iran's influence in Iraq, solidify Iraqi independence and eventually inspire progressive change across the region. His view of internal political dynamics in Iran and Tehran's goals in Iraq can inform our understanding of the important Iraq-Iran bilateral relationship.

¶11. (C) Saudi Arabia: Abd al-Mahdi will press the United States to strengthen its efforts to persuade all Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to embrace Iraq more closely and to reconsider their suspicions that it is an Iranian pawn. He recognizes that Iraq's democratic consolidation threatens those autocratic regimes, and suspects that many (especially Saudi Arabia) are meddling in Iraq's domestic politics to undermine cross-sectarian cooperation before national elections in March, as a way to ensure a weak, fractured regime in Baghdad, unable to project regional influence.

¶12. (C) Turkey: Abd al-Mahdi values Turkey's engagement in Iraq and recently met with PM Erdogan and FM Davatoglu in Ankara to discuss counterterrorism cooperation, including QAnkara to discuss counterterrorism cooperation, including against Kurdish PKK elements based in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and investment opportunities.

¶13. (C) Yemen: The intensification of the conflict between the ROYG and Houthi rebels has attracted intense interest in Iraq, and Abd al-Mahdi will likely offer his thoughts on how to foster reconciliation in Yemen. Abd al-Mahdi shares our concerns about Al Qaeda's presence in Yemen, but will likely criticize what he views as Washington's "unconditional" support for President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

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